

The magic of journalism in George Johnston's fiction

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About 200 Australian journalists have written novels in the past two centuries. None has achieved wider popular acclaim than the dual Miles Franklin Award winner, George Johnston. In 1995 his novel *My Brother Jack* (1964) was named one of the 20th century's twelve most influential Australian books. In 1984, it was voted, by a wide margin, the best novel published in Australia since 1945. Yet Johnston's critical recognition has been comparatively sparse and there has been no detailed examination of how his journalism influenced his fiction. This article argues that Johnston's training and experience in journalism informed and enabled his fiction, thereby helping to shape Australia's national identity. Privileged by journalism's much misunderstood magic, his search for meaning in that identity helped to shape his own identity. In addressing that misunderstanding, this paper calls for a new interdisciplinary partnership between scholars in literature and journalism so that the journalistic inheritance in so many novels can be more comprehensively examined.

George Johnston always wanted to be an archeologist (Johnston 2000). This seems fitting because both archeology and journalism entail excavating the past to bring meaning, understanding and perspective to the present. But Johnston had an image, rather than a shovel, in hand when he began his working life in Melbourne as an apprentice lithographer. He had completed a state school education at age fifteen before joining a commercial art studio, which required him to study art at the National Gallery School. That provided reference points for a subsequent friendship with Sidney Nolan. In contributing artwork for the cover of *My Brother Jack*, Nolan credited Johnston with helping to inspire him to paint his signature Gallipoli series. The compatriots in art can be credited with

pre-eminence in capturing the culturally formative myths of Anzacs and national identity; Nolan through his brush, and Johnston through his words as novelist and journalist.

Although George Johnston's early talent in and exposure to art may have helped shape his approach to fiction, this article will argue that journalism and war were the greatest influences on Johnston the novelist. They shaped – and sometimes misshaped – his writing while contributing the themes and settings that framed his fiction. Journalism gave Johnston a front-row seat for World War II. It also served as a laboratory in which he could hone writing skills and acquire experience to feed his fiction. Indeed, the profession was like a fabulously rich uncle. In sending him to 64 countries as a war correspondent, it provided the skills, experiences, perspectives and authority that, as a primer for fiction, no other profession could equal.

George Johnston tweaked a national chord by decoding Australia, in part, through his work as a journalist and his fictionalized account of it. Through *My Brother Jack*, fact and fiction became partners in inspiring a “sense of self” in the Australian character of the inter-war years. By creating an archetypal Australian, Jack Meredith, Johnston put himself in the role of Jack's brother David. *My Brother Jack* becomes a doppelganger called My Country, Jack, or at least what “Jack's country's” once was. The Jack-David duality becomes Australia's duality. Through Jack, the old Australia is personified as a working-class, knockabout suburbanite. As sentimental savage, Jack's sense of mateship and patriotism highlight the values the country once worshipped. Through narrator and journalist David Meredith, the new Australia becomes urban, white-collar and sophisticated. In the process Anzac myths are downsized, thereby gaining a dose of reality while sacrificing spiritual and moral muscle. Johnston uses David to map seminal aspects of Australia's cultural evolution. In so doing, Australia could see that it was no longer Jack's country. It had become David's.

This article will not argue that journalism produces the best novelists, that it privileges creativity or that it always enables fiction. It acknowledges that journalist-novelists ranging from Ernest Hemingway to Robert Drewe and George Johnston have cautioned against lauding journalism as a would-be novelist's workshop. It also will not position

Johnston as a “typical journalist”. Typical journalists do not write novels. It cannot even be asserted that Johnston was typical of journalists who write novels. He did much more than that. Only 11 of his 27 books were novels. He also wrote short stories and plays for the theatre, radio and television as well as 16 non-fiction books.

Johnston’s pluralistic approach to writing suggests a literary impulse, an innate ability, destined for public expression without a newsroom imprimatur. But it will be argued that journalism made Johnston a better writer, and certainly a different one, than he otherwise would have been. As with every life, one event seems to lead inexorably to another. The consecutive and cumulative impacts produce results that, in hindsight, seem inevitable. So it is with Johnston. As a teenager his interest in sailing ships resulted in publication of freelance stories on the topic. This earned him a newspaper cadetship at Melbourne’s *Argus*. Because of his interest in ships, he found himself excelling at the shipping rounds. As World War II approached, that experience qualified him to write stories about the Australian navy. This in turn led to fact-fiction adventure books about naval campaigns and contributed to his posting as a war correspondent. It is no wonder, then, that Johnston saw a career as a full-time novelist within his grasp and approached his war-reporting duties knowing they would provide a gleaming tapestry for fiction.

Journalism is embedded in Johnston’s fiction and propelled his journalist-to-novelist transition. The profession enabled his approach to literature and was inseparable from it. In educating him about people, places and issues that would animate his novels, journalism worked like magic, an alchemy that has neither been understood nor adequately examined by Australia’s literary scholars. It paid the bills while becoming the core ingredient in the production and transmission of Johnston’s fiction.

In providing a forum and context for pursuing matters of public interest and conveying the findings in a consumable form, journalists have observer status for society’s key institutions. For Johnston, the resultant understanding and knowledge generated and nourished themes in his fiction. In enabling his fiction journalism was the crucible for experiencing and interpreting Australia and the wider

world to which war reporting exposed him. Those interpretations and experiences were interwoven into novels that spoke to a nation. Australia was compelled to listen. In so doing, it recognised itself much as a city can see its reflection in the daily newspaper.

Johnston: the critical and popular heritage

There is an imbalance in the critical and popular acceptance of George Johnston's fiction. Critics and scholars do not place him at the forefront of Australian novelists. His early novels are regarded as money-spinning potboilers unworthy of inclusion in the national literary canon. Indeed, most Australians had never heard of him before *My Brother Jack* was published in 1964. Critics have tended to see it as autobiographical and therefore not fiction drawn primarily from imagination.

Johnston's most noteworthy recognition came through Miles Franklin Awards for *My Brother Jack* (1964) and *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969). However, Johnston is mentioned on just three pages in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (Bennett & Strauss 1998: 185, 242, 313). The book's 17 scholar-contributors give Johnston less attention than any of the other six two-time Miles Franklin winners except Tim Winton, who won a third award in 2002. Eight one-time winners listed are mentioned, on average, in twice the number of pages as those on which Johnston's work is cited. His key citation is for *My Brother Jack*, which is recorded as one of a number of "best sellers" in a 1940-1965 literature survey. The novel is described as "muted criticism by a younger generation of the restrictive 'suburban values' of their parents' generation". Johnston's comparative lack of critical recognition can be viewed in conjunction with the reception Arthur Upfield received in 1928 for his first novel, a thriller. Richard Nile (1998: 145) says Upfield was not considered a "proper" author because he wrote for the market. Upfield argued that popular fiction was the backbone of popular culture because it was unpretentious. While criticism has moved on since 1928 it may retain vestiges of the "Upfield syndrome" in its assessment of George Johnston's fiction,

which commits the literary crime of thinking of readers – and book sales – before imaginative aerobics.

Lee Brotherson (1997: 84) observes that *My Brother Jack* received “surprisingly little critical attention” given its prestigious national award and the fact that it was the most popular Australian novel of its era. In his book on Australian war correspondents, Peter Sekules (1999: 88) says the genius and secret appeal of *My Brother Jack* are entwined in its span of two world wars. According to John Colmer (1989: 47), few Australian novelists besides George Johnston have given such a full and complex picture of those inter-war years. In Scott Milson’s view (1999: 12) the novel “is without peer as an evocation of the impact of World War II on Australia”.

By 1986 *My Brother Jack* had sold more than 300,000 copies (Kinnane 1986: viii). It was the first novel in a trilogy that includes *Clean Straw for Nothing* and *A Cartload of Clay* (1971). *My Brother Jack* has shown remarkable endurance. Twice it has been adapted for television, most recently during 2001 when a two-part mini-series was aired. In 1995 it was named through a readers’ poll in the *Weekend Australian* as one of the 12 most influential Australian books of the 20th century. Its company included *First Stone*, by Helen Garner, *Voss* by Patrick White, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* by Henry Handel Richardson and *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin (Slattery 1995: 1-2). In 1984 *My Brother Jack* was voted the best novel published in Australia since 1945 by a “staggeringly high margin” in a Great Australian Novel quest run by ABC Radio in association with the *Australian Book Review* (Clancy 1990: 7). Johnston finished second to Patrick White as favourite author.

H.G. Kippax (1969: 18) sees *My Brother Jack* as one of Australia’s most successful novels. The *Illustrated London News* agrees. It describes it as “one of the greatest books written this century”, although the *New Statesman* (Bryden 1964) finds it “isn’t quite as coherent, or as good, as that pattern may suggest”. F.H. Mares (1964) believes the novel represents a distinguished search for both national and personal identity. Susan McKernan (1989: 218-19) argues that it maps the “childishness” of the Australian hero while appearing to celebrate national virtues. However, she adds that although it succeeds too thoroughly in allowing

the intellectual man to triumph over the physical one, the novel converts the intellectual man into a new kind of Australian hero.

Johnston's writing ability has not been universally acclaimed. Critics frequently cite his journalistic background in unflattering terms when assessing his fiction. Keith Thomas (1964: 20) laments language misuse in *My Brother Jack*, describing the author as a "verbose, careless writer" who is "largely indiscriminating" in word usage. In his review of *Clean Straw for Nothing*, Kippax (1969: 18) finds some language "too rapturous" and, at times, loose and self-indulgent. He adds that while evocation of place does not meet "Lawrentian standards" it does reach the "top flight of journalism". Like Kippax, Clement Semmler (1969: 246) is critical of prose in *Clean Straw for Nothing*. The novel's first half is "cliché-ridden as if Mr Johnston could not get his creative mind properly geared – clichés of phrase, of character, of incident". Yet he finds Johnston enlivens it through his "sensitively professional flair which, allied with a literary creativeness, contributes to his importance as a writer no less than it did to Hemingway or has done to Graham Greene". Alan Marshall (1964: 95) says that while high literary standards guide *My Brother Jack*, it contains sections in which the journalist Johnston overwhelms the novelist Johnston. He has at his disposal "a rich warehouse of phrases, images, useful words and tried methods polished by years of writing against the clock". Johnston "can't help but pull them out of their pigeon holes when his mind flags".

The *Walkabout* reviewer (Scrutarius 1964: 40 & 11) asserts that "almost any workmanlike writer could evolve a good story" like *My Brother Jack* from a background as rich as Johnston's. The reviewer concedes Johnston deftly draws character. In so doing he "builds a humdinger, almost a great novel, if not quite". Patrick Morgan (1974: 11) finds much of *My Brother Jack* to be "straight social reportage". He adds: "Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that Johnston's most acclaimed novel is his most nearly factual". Peter Sekules (1999: 8) says he was a "journalist's novelist" whose description of a leading daily newspaper in *My Brother Jack* represents an invaluable historic record as well as memorable prose. McKernan (1989: 220) comments that the novel is written in "clear, even journalist style". But, as a social novel, she says

its values are in accord with those of symbolic novelist Patrick White, whose novel *Riders in the Chariot* has striking similarities with attitudes expressed in *My Brother Jack*: “Both novels attack Australian suburbia for its rejection of the artist and the intellectual. Both identify suburban women with some cruelty”. In Johnston’s novel, according to McLaren (1964: 55), Jack and David Meredith grow up in “the deserts of pre-war suburbia ... a symbol of a whole dreary middle-class culture of respectability and desperation”.

Given that White has been the subject of more than 1000 critical articles and reviews (Nile 2001), it may be worthwhile to consider briefly his work. It is reasonable to assume that White and Johnston were influenced during the 1940s and 1950s by what David Carter (1992: 110) calls “a vast amount of signifying activity going into the business of creating something to belong to, a tradition that was always and already there”. If belonging to Australia means understanding it, then perhaps the more one understands it, the more one identifies with and belongs to it. This may be a core, cumulative impact of the best of White and Johnston’s fiction. According to McKernan (1989: 172), White was seeking to understand Australia through the process of writing *The Tree of Man*. The same can be said about Johnston’s national and individual identity formation suggested in *My Brother Jack*. Through David Meredith, Johnston could quote himself from a safe, almost journalistic, distance. In the process, Meredith let him see Australia, and himself, from outside in. Consequently Australia saw itself from inside out, a worldview from a domestic stance through Johnston’s globetrotting eyes.

In seeking to create “something to belong to”, White and Johnston may have achieved a form of illumination for themselves and their readers. Their differing approaches to that aim are reflected in Johnston’s criticism of White in an address to the Australian Society of Authors in 1968 (Johnston 1968). He said he preferred Thomas Keneally to White, who “has an over-obsession with what we loosely define as ‘style’”. His mention of Keneally is instructive. Of the non-journalist Miles Franklin winners, Keneally is the most journalistic in his documentary, fact-based approach to fiction. In his address, Johnston also quoted Eugene Ionesco in praise of originality: “It is novelty which is the

true sign of sincerity, which is truth. What is original is true. What resembles everything else being done is false, because convention is an impersonal falsehood". This seems ironic, given accusations that Johnston recycled clichés and journalistic language in his fiction. In helping to mythologise the military heroics of the Kokoda Trail as a Melbourne *Argus* war correspondent Johnston agreed that the knee-deep mud, the man-high kunai grass and muscle tearing razor-backs had become clichés: "But I invented them" (Hutton 1970: 6).

Through *My Brother Jack*, Johnston also created a eulogy to the Anzacs. Whether in journalism or in fiction, his immersion in and contribution to cultural indoctrination become evident: the ways of war represent pathways to manhood and national identity. Likened to Greek gods, Australia's fighting men are idealised. Johnston was not one of them because he chose to write rather than to fight. That decision haunted him to the end of his life as well as to the end of *My Brother Jack* when David Meredith, as the celebrity war correspondent, watched a military parade pass him by:

... and I thought of Jack ... looking just like these men, hard and strong and confident and with brown legs planted in the Seymour dust as if the whole world was his to conquer, a man fulfilled in his own rightness, and suddenly and terribly I knew that all the Jacks were marching past me, all the Jacks were marching. (1964: 342-343)

Critics note Johnston's late work demonstrates a progression in his writing to more traditional novelistic forms. In other words, the further he got from journalism the less journalistic his fiction became. Graeme Kinross-Smith (1987: 38) finds in *Clean Straw for Nothing*, *My Brother Jack's* sequel, that Johnston was more involved than ever before in the theory of the novelist's craft. F.H. Mares agrees (1988: 363). Although he says it seems unlikely Johnston felt much kinship with French post-structuralist literary theories he was interested in such theories. While Mares finds *My Brother Jack* to be "competent autobiographical fiction of a fairly conventional kind", *Clean Straw for Nothing* represents a much more sophisticated work

In his best fiction, Johnston is both a maker and debunker of Australian myths in the social realist tradition. He superimposes his life, as experienced through journalism's prism, onto his fiction. In so

doing he capitalises on a kind of national narcissism in which history and myth, fiction and journalism, unite to create cultural identities. If society invents the heroes it needs, then Johnston contributed to their construction. The process privileges the merging of “romance” and “realism”, a tradition that arose during the 1940s. At its centre, says Carter (2001: 195), are true understanding of character and serious moral concern. The conflicts and symmetries between “character” and “morality” form the basis of Johnston’s finest work.

Turning life into literature and journalism

Bruce Bennett and Laurie Hergenhan are noteworthy among Australian literary scholars who have examined journalism’s fiction links. Bennett has taken a special interest in Robert Drewe and Hergenhan has written extensively on Marcus Clarke. Bennett (1989: 15) acknowledges that Drewe’s journalism had a strong narrative line. He also believes the profession’s motivating power, “the push for truth”, has influenced his fiction. Hergenhan (1972: xxiv & xxviii) recognises that Clarke, in pioneering the regular newspaper column in Australia, used journalism to build a reputation and hone his writing, thus demonstrating the “literary potentialities” of what was close at hand.

In the US, Shelley Fisher Fishkin has written at length about novelists who served literary apprenticeships, noting that critics and scholars have neglected the journalism-fiction nexus in the work of such writers as Twain and Hemingway. According to Fishkin (1985: 3): “By glossing over the continuities between the journalism and fiction of these great writers they have missed an important aspect of American literary history and biography”. More recently Michael Robertson has examined Stephen Crane’s journalism and the ways in which it informed his fiction. He says Crane exploited his role as reporter for mass-circulation newspapers to gather experiences that might otherwise have been inaccessible to a Methodist minister’s son (1997: 179). But Robertson also observes that misunderstandings of the fact-fiction discourse of 1890s journalism have distorted readings of many of his works, adding that Crane’s journalism is worthy of study on its own as literary journalism (1997: 5-6). In addition,

doctoral dissertations overseas have examined the journalistic form and authority in the fiction of Hemingway, Zola, Twain, Dickens, Mailer, Marquez, Dreiser, Crane, Dos Passos, James, Woolfe, O'Brien, Cather and Joyce. Many of these theses have been completed in recent years and demonstrate an increasing scholarly interest in journalism's fact-fiction convergences. In comparison, Australian scholars have all but ignored the phenomenon.

Johnston's biographer, Garry Kinnane (1986: 57), contends that his reporting from Asia during the mid-1940s reflected what the role demanded: to convey meaning without going too far into meaning. "Not only is this good reporting, but it is also a sound training for a novelist". Nadia Wheatley (1989-90: 38) argues that Johnston's journalistic training encouraged him to grab at the immediate idea or image, producing "a superficial slickness". This was evident in his writing speed: For one section of a travel book, he wrote 35,000 words in 19 hours.

Although Kinnane (1986: 34-35) also notes the great rapidity with which Johnston wrote as an author and as a journalist there is little recognition of journalism and fiction's symbiotic nature. For instance, he finds it remarkable that Johnston wrote *Grey Gladiator* (1941) in just 10 days. According to Kinnane before writing his first book Johnston had had no training in war research or experience in writing anything other than short articles. Yet he agrees Johnston made "effective use of description peppered with statistics, terse dialogue and rapid shifts of focus and clipped sentences". He struck "the right note for the subject" through "intuitive flair". Such an assessment overlooks the journalistic skills that Johnston had acquired. Scholars may equally speculate on how journalist Margaret Mitchell hit the "right note" and brought "intuitive flair" to her only novel, *Gone with the Wind*, which remains the fastest selling book in publishing history (Tonkin 2002: 4). Mitchell had worked as a reporter and feature writer for the *Atlanta Journal* from 1922 to 1926, the year she began working on her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

While quantity rather than quality dominates Johnston's journalism and fiction, there is something to be said for writing velocity. It would have pleased book publishers and newspaper editors. He completed

The Cyprian Woman (1955) a month early, and there is no evidence of journalistic tardiness. Sekules (1999: 8) says Johnston was “the journalist’s novelist” who “let it all hang out in his writing”. Journalist Johnston relied on sub-editors to refine his hurried work. The prose of novelist Johnston may not have received the same attention. Compared with book editors, sub-editors have considerable power (Sellers 1985: 1), which they often wield without reference to reporters. In fitting a story into limited space they often must cull, refine and condense it (Print Inquiry 1992: 249). In contrast, book editors operate under less daily pressure. They also have fewer concerns about length and more respect for a writer’s autonomy and artistic freedom. Therefore they generally are more reluctant than sub-editors to tamper with prose.

Johnston’s journalistic research, training and experience over the previous 11 years informed his approach to and execution of his first book-length work. It is instructive that *Grey Gladiator* and two subsequent books, *Battle of the Seaways* (1941) and *Australia at War* (1942), evolved from journalistic assignments. The books contributed to his posting as Australia’s first accredited war correspondent, a role that informed his best fiction. This journalist-novelist link is suggestive of a largely unrecognised pattern in the fiction of other such authors. It is as if journalism is the “off Broadway” performance that is tested for Broadway potential. For instance Dickens wrote about poverty, Twain wrote about racism and Orwell wrote about censorship as journalists before they addressed these subjects as novelists. Marcus Clarke’s durable classic, *His Natural Life*, had journalistic antecedents: he collected much of the historical detail while on a journalistic assignment in Tasmania (Conley 2000: 66). The central events in Robert Drewe’s award-winning novel, *Fortune*, were based on incidents Drewe had written about for the *Bulletin* (Conley 1998: 52). Hemingway was writing about the Spanish civil war as a journalist four years before *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was published. Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was preceded by a series of articles on migrant labor camps he wrote for the *San Francisco News*. It is possible to exaggerate such links. According to Charlotte Alexander:

It should be emphasised that there is a vast distinction to be made between Steinbeck’s newspaper report of the migrants’ plight and his now-famous

novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; there is some value in knowing, however, the actual background of experience from which the author worked on his novel. (1965: 15)

Alexander makes an important point. Despite similarities in journalism and fiction relating to research, observation, story telling, readership and themes, it is a simplistic binary to equate them in terms of cause and effect. However, this article does not support the formalist critic who separates a work from its author and readers. Literature is symbolic and metaphorical. Understanding a work's antecedents and creator can take the reader – and the critic – closer to truths rooted in it. Cleanth Brooks (1998: 52-53) argues: "Man's experience is indeed a seamless garment, no part of which can be separated from the rest". Hemingway biographer James Mellow (1994: 275-76) agrees no story abandons its author: "Every nuance, prejudice, every innocent detail of a fiction bears the genetic imprint of the writer. If a writer borrows experiences, situations, uses the gossip of other people's lives, creates characters of his own, what he does with them is his choice, reflects his character and imagination". Examining a body of work, says Brooks (1998: 52-53), does not mean "cutting it loose from its author and from his life as a man, with his own particular hopes, fears, interests, conflicts, etc". Yet emphasising a work might seem to involve separating it from readers. Equally, speculation on the author's mental processes moves the critic away from the work and into the realms of psychology, personality and biography. In so doing, Brooks warns, critics should not confuse the work for the author.

Hemingway, Orwell, Steinbeck, Drewe, Johnston and Clarke could have been novelists without journalism. But they were journalists and that flavours their fiction. However, trying to identify, isolate and measure the journalistic impacts in relation to other influences on their fiction is like trying to deconstruct a mudcake. It is bound to get messy. For example, it can be asserted that Hemingway's experience as a *Kansas City Star* reporter contributed to his decision to enlist as a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy during World War I. This, in turn, resulted in his becoming a war hero – the first American to be injured in Italy – despite poor eyesight having barred him from enlistment. The link is evident in the longest identifiable feature story from

Hemingway's earliest journalism. It was headlined "At the end of the ambulance run" and describes hospital emergency room procedures. His subsequent injuries as a wartime ambulance driver became a centerpiece of *A Farewell to Arms*. The novel made him famous, shaping the rest of his life and his fiction. Did the feature story inspire Hemingway to volunteer as an ambulance driver? Or was it connected to an early exposure to medicine? His father, after all, was a doctor. Or did the city editor simply assign the story to him?

Whether considering the journalism-fiction nexus in Hemingway's or Johnston's work, it is worth noting Christopher Benfey's caution (1994: 5-6) when assessing an author's career. In his view, it is a mistake to take the "real life" for granted and impose its footprints upon the "imaginary life" in his writings. "For surely this is the wrong way around. What solidity and givenness there is in a writer's life exists first in the writings. The problem is to see how the work of art shaped the writer's life."

Johnston: 'The Verdict'

Journalism shaped George Johnston's life because, for most of it, he could not make an adequate living through his fiction. He and Clift left Australia in 1951 for London where he managed the European Bureau for Australian Associated newspapers and wrote a column for the *Sun* in Sydney. Johnston, then 39, had written nine books, most of them non-fiction. He used his contacts at *Australasian Post*, of which he had been founding editor in 1946, to have the first chapter of a novel, *Moon at Perigee* (1948), published as a short story in the magazine. In 1954, after Johnston had completed his fourth novel, he and Clift moved to the Greek islands where they hoped to earn enough through fiction to support themselves and their children. Pressed for money, Johnston wrote the first of six crime-mystery "potboilers" under the name of Shane Martin.

In late 1958 Johnston began an autobiographical novel set on the island of Silenos. *Closer to the Sun* (1960) introduced David Meredith but failed commercially. Johnston used the book, in part, to attack Clift for her affair with a Frenchman on the island. His personal

Gallipoli had begun in Athens two years earlier when he learned of his tuberculosis. Until then he had not deliberately exposed much of himself in his writing. Like the journalist seeking disembodied objectivity, he previously focused on what he saw as his greatest prose allies: exotic settings and celebrated historical subjects. He largely had relied on the journalistic dictum: get a good story and it talk. According to Kinnane the tuberculosis finding was central to Johnston's changed attitude to writing:

To him it was a death sentence and there is nothing like a death sentence to raise a person's consciousness of how much of his life and work he has wasted. George had spent far too much time and energy on hastily written pot-boiler novels. After he was told he had the illness he scarcely wrote another word that was not in deadly earnest – and how this new determination changed his writing! Suddenly there is a voice in his work – a clear original voice with interesting and urgent things to said. This new spirit in his work produced the trilogy beginning with *My Brother Jack*. (1983: xiv)

Kinross-Smith (1987: 33-34) says a subsequent short story entitled "The Verdict" (Johnston 1984) finds Johnston speaking through David Meredith. It represents the first time in print that Johnston expresses deeper levels of anxiety about himself as a writer and as a man in ill health: "There is first the admission that he has felt the need to write something other than journalism, pulp novels, or what at most were compelling and exotic pot-boilers." Kinross-Smith asserts that this transformation in his world-view, tone of voice and self-analysis later surface in *My Brother Jack*.

"The Verdict" ends with Meredith's childhood reminiscence. Though wishing he were dead, he recognises nothing has been resolved. He must begin all over again. He seeks a fresh outlook from his own "trench" where death has become a sudden, personal reality (1984: 172). The illness magnifies Johnston's interior life, past and present. What has always been "out-most" – his journalism, his travels, war correspondence and chaotic marriage and social life – suddenly became "in-most" as he searches for meaning and understanding. That search begins where he has sought and found much in life: through his writing.

It is his role as a war correspondent that chiefly informed Johnston's views of his profession and of himself as a writer and a person. These views, given new urgency and clarity by his illness, begin to show themselves in *The Far Road* (1962), which is set in China during World War II. Even so, Johnston still has bills to pay. This necessity is behind an air force adventure novel, *The Far Face of the Moon* (1964). By late 1962 Johnston has finished the first chapter of *My Brother Jack*. In a letter he tells his publisher that: "All I can say to you [is] that the present novel ... is immeasurably the best thing I have ever done, and it is certainly the novel on which I would be prepared to stake my writing future" (Kinnane 1986: 216). It is during this period that he begins to think more about themes of expatriation, about what it means to be Australian. On the novel's completion in 1963 plans are underway to return to Australia. After 14 years overseas, Johnston launches *My Brother Jack* at the Adelaide Festival in March 1964.

A literature review uncovers discourse on the fact-fiction elements in *My Brother Jack*. In particular there is discussion about whether autobiographical approaches to fiction represent a failed imagination, a commitment to realism or a combination of both. Aspects of the novel troubled friends and relatives. Johnston found himself trapped by the journalistic presumption of fidelity to "facts" and "truth" without the countervailing license to pursue fiction's "higher truths". For example, he was accused of inflating his brother into a composite hero while deflating his father into a composite tyrant. Even Johnston-Clift friends become confused in making distinctions between people they knew and those depicted (Kinross-Smith 1987: 23). The instances of "fiction" diverging from "fact" are too numerous to list here. Some seem calculated to protect people close to Johnston. Others may have a legal basis, or may simply have resulted from a faulty memory in recalling incidents 30 years later.

F.H. Mares (1964) says the harsh father and idealised brother can be interpreted as a method of framing and contrasting David Meredith. Indeed, Jack Johnston is not equal to his heroic fictional counterpart. Before Australia entered the war he joined the militia because a drill hall was located near where he played tennis at Brighton on Sundays. He had noticed (Eagle 1983) "blokes came of there with bottles in

their arms, half stung". That proved irresistible; restrictive hotel trading hours meant joining the militia would allow him to drink beer after tennis: "We were in it about a bloody month and the war broke out, so if you had been running around in a uniform you can't sort of not join up." In the novel Jack Meredith injures his knee in training at Puckapunyal and is shattered that this negates an overseas posting. In fact Jack Johnston injured his knee showing his daughter how to high jump. He saw himself as fortunate to be posted instead to Darwin: many in his original unit were taken prisoner in Singapore.

Other amendments to factual circumstances seem based on narrative or dramatic considerations, or for purposes of conflict, theme and characterisation. An indication of Johnston's attitude to the fact-fiction issue can be found in a quotation from Andre Gide that he places before Chapter 1 begins: "Fiction there is – and history. Certain critics of no little discernment have considered that fiction is history which might have taken place, and history fiction which has taken place. We are indeed forced to acknowledge that the novelist's art often compels belief, just as reality sometimes defies it." Of Johnston, one reviewer of the novel says he "cannot help speculating how far if at all he is confessing the truth" (Scrutarius 1964: 39). Another asks, "whether he was on a campaign of self-justification. Why did he need to rearrange the facts so much?" (*Australian Magazine*, 1995: 10).

Perhaps chastened by reaction to *My Brother Jack*, Johnston writes in an author's note to the sequel, *Clean Straw for Nothing*, that it represents a "very free rendering of the truth". In the text (1969: 10) he reveals: "Once you've traded in experience for the memory of experience there's no difference any longer between the lies and the actualities: you might as well have it the way you would have liked it to have been: given enough time you'll come to believe genuinely that this was the way it was". The honesty in Johnston's approach is reflected in making *The Fall of Man* a major theme and identifying himself as the one to "fall".

John Colmer (1989: 32) points out that David Meredith permits Johnston to express most of the era's ideological conflicts and psychological tensions. He adds that, "the autobiographical element in fiction is accompanied by an equally strong sense of the need to

reshape the raw materials of experience into a significant pattern". The goal, therefore, is to re-create the substance of an experience so that it can become everyone's. Kinanne (1986: 219) says it should be kept in mind that Johnston intended to "tell the truth". In so doing he controlled and constructed his material so that it charts Meredith's development and progress toward discovery and revelation of character. But it also should be borne in mind that *In My Brother Jack* a colleague tells Meredith (1964: 246): "You know the old adage, 'don't get it right, get it written!' Well, I think it would be a bit harsh to apply that to you, but at the same time you do, I suspect, have tendencies towards the slightly unscrupulous".

It may be that the public nature of Johnston's work and profession made his novels a bigger target for critics superimposing his life and journalism over his fiction. Whether his novels present Australians as they were, as they are or as they would like to be, the recognition it stimulates indicates a level of truth not found in every novel. Kinross-Smith (1987: 40) comments that, time and again in each novel, fact and fiction intersect with real people. This raises questions about "reality", "accuracy" and "accountability". In telling David Meredith's story, Johnston was "in essence and spirit writing about himself, and thus ... the more precious critics ... deny him some of his achievement in artistic honesty, suffering and painfully emotional self-probings – the elements that make for the book's fascination and depth".

Journalism is not a faultless vehicle for fiction, but it is a vehicle. Elizabeth Riddell (1970: 11) highlights the difficulties in combining the two forms of expression:

In Australia, if you start out in newspapers it is very hard to stop being a journalist and become a "writer". There is a fine line there, and many people cross and recross it several times. George was one of these, and aware of it. But nobody struggled harder, in his last years, to keep the writing cool and faithful to the subject and the aim.

With some reservations, it can be said that journalism benefited Johnston's innate writing abilities. Although it privileges speed and accuracy over reflection, creativity and depth, it gave him his earliest taste of writing for publication. It also encouraged him to continue doing so, both in terms of professional development and for a regular

income. Through feedback from editors, sources and readers journalism was a vital proving ground for goal-directed prose that had to be timely and topical in satisfying a broad readership.

It is not asserted, however, that readers of newspapers and readers of fiction can be conflated into a homogenous whole. But the reactions Johnston's journalism elicited from readers may have given him an advantage in fiction. It is the advantage of an actor who, based on previous performances, crafts his intonations and mannerisms for maximum effect. Whether in journalism or in fiction, Johnston accepted his writing must satisfy a paying audience. But this commitment did not always prevail. On at least three occasions he violated unwritten contractual obligations between writer and reader. In the first instance, he offered Qantas "substantial" positive mentions in *Clean Straw for Nothing* in exchange for a flight back to Australia to promote *My Brother Jack* (Kinnane 1986: 226). In the same text, he plagiarised from Clift's notebook observations she made during a 1952 European holiday (Kinnane 1986: 123). Thirdly, Johnston was disingenuous with readers in *Clean Straw for Nothing* when he failed to indicate journalism effectively rejected him rather than the other way around. He left London for Greece after being demoted. Then he could not find work in London after failing to write the money-spinning best seller for which he so hungered. Says Kinnane:

It was one thing to reject the rat-race; to be rejected by the rat-race was an entirely different matter. Johnston never made it plain in his writing that this was a factor in his abandonment of journalism. On the contrary, he always gave the impression that it was the profession's shortcomings that drove him out (1986: 132).

As Johnston saw it

In his fiction, George Johnston does not pay journalism many compliments. In *The Far Road* (1962: 73-74) David Meredith says that growing up in obscurity turns journalists into "wandering mercenaries of the Press, selling their abilities". They go where the money is good and the assignments interesting. Johnston, through Meredith, likened journalism to a form of immaturity (1962: 36): "Once you had lost

that juvenile spark you were no longer a good journalist.” When he got “tired of being clever he would get out, and perhaps then he would do some real writing”. Later he revisits this point (1962: 169), saying a time is coming “when he must quit the game and try something else, something where the values were constant and worth while”. Meredith says in a later age Judas would have been a journalist (1962: 56).

In *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969: 122-23) Meredith complains to Cressida that anytime he tries to write about nuclear dangers “they sub it down to pap or spike it altogether”. When she encourages him to keep trying, he continues that “we’re letting them turn the world into a rat-race and a jungle and nobody gives a bugger”; that “you try to write anything intelligent and important and they won’t wear it” and that “the bastards are only interested in circulation”. Millions of people in Europe are homeless but they do not rate a paragraph. Meanwhile, “they’ll give the whole front page to some trashy little film starlet’s views on men”. There is more than a little irony in the fact that Johnston proceeds to Greece, not to set the world aright, but to write equally reader-driven “pot boilers” to feed his growing family.

In *My Brother Jack* (1964: 165), Meredith speaks of the “dreary routine work” in collecting items for “personal column” use from major hotels and obtaining stock exchange and market reports, shipping lists and tide tables: “All this was presumed to be part of a training in the accuracy of compiling and presenting facts”. Such raw material was not gathered for shaping into a narrative format for reader consumption. However, it was part of a fact-gathering ethos that led to such writing in both journalism and fiction. Colmer (1989: 35) says of *My Brother Jack*: “The world it creates is authentically Australian, full of closely observed and accurately rendered details of Australian urban life”.

Johnston had an advantage in understanding, describing and interpreting communities of all stripes in fiction because he had already done so in journalism. In this regard his experience on the shipping rounds is instructive. No other duty could have offered him a better opportunity to broaden his horizons and engender the global and national perspectives that would empower his fiction. As Sekules points out (1999: 90), shipping rounds typically involved meeting incoming mail steamers to interview interesting passengers. “Reporting

the actual words of people who had just left Europe gave the distant but threatening events a sort of reality”.

In *My Brother Jack*, David Meredith (1964: 179-80) remarks that, before radio and submarine cables, the only way Melbourne readers got news from the rest of the world was from shipping reporters meeting ships. Although this was no longer the case in Johnston's day, the *Argus* was old-fashioned and maintained the tradition. According to Meredith, despite cable services and radio broadcasts, it still seemed that “whatever was happening in Europe, the spiritual truth of events, I mean, could be given reality only by the fact of somebody *talking* about them”. He would obtain a passenger list and go from cabin to cabin in search of a story. Some became angry at the intrusions but it was worth the search for “some revelation or oracular presence or mystical enlightenment which, in bringing the truth from far away, might help explain the dissonance of the world”.

The shipping rounds exposed young Johnston to people from many cultures. In so doing it encouraged him to view Australia in an international context. It also served as a primer for the alien customs, lifestyles, languages and political systems he would confront as a war correspondent and exploit in his fiction. No university offers such a grassroots education. It enriched and informed his global perspectives and thematic approaches while he researched and wrote fiction and non-fiction in 14 years overseas. The shipping rounds also afforded greater autonomy than other duties. While superiors decided what to publish, it was largely up to Johnston to decide whom to interview and what to write about.

In *My Brother Jack* these interviews become “a creative key to a scarified world confirming his isolation and fear” (Scheckter 1991: 121). Given the language barriers implicit in many of the interviews, Johnston faced the added pressure of understanding and accurately recording interviewee comments while seeking their trust. The interviews also mirrored war-reporting dilemmas. Because he could not be a direct observer of events he must describe, he relied on others' experiences to build, or re-build, pictures of reality. Meredith/Johnston was intrigued by what the wharf-based interviews represented. In *My Brother Jack*, Meredith:

... had to be there, right there in front of us, sitting in a tasteful cabin with the louvers faintly whistling, describing the smoke pall above the Reichstag, or the massed banners tossing on the Templehof or the endless torchlit tramlings of the Brownshirt columns ... or telling of the night-rappings, the shots in the streets, the forced arrests, the marks on the walls, the brandings, and the whispered rumours of Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald and Ravensbruck ... only then did it become part of the true and terrible dissonance of the times. (1964: 180-81)

In the process, Johnston made news value calculations. These involved questions such as: What elements and practices in other cultures would be of interest to an Australian readership? Whose stories can serve as microcosms for their nations? Even at this early stage Johnston was superimposing people over cultures and nations in order to reach an Australian audience. In so doing he demonstrated a facility for social documentation, humanising news as he would later humanise his fiction.

The “human interest” news value is more directly associated with feature and colour writing – and hence “creativity” – than any other textual approach in journalism. It is reflected in “human news” linked to basic needs, such as food and shelter, and to social issues – both chronic and embryonic – that affect those needs. As a news value human interest can be a unifying force. In highlighting a community’s shared humanity, it embraces story telling to remind people that “we’re all in this together”.

A call to the academy

On a comparative basis, observation suggests there are a lot of lawyers who become politicians. When considering why this could be so, a political scientist might develop a cluster of questions to investigate the apparent phenomenon. What is it about the study and practice of the law that might encourage lawyers to stand for office? What is it about politics that might make lawyers particularly suited to governance? Are they any more or less effective than politicians without a legal background, and if so why might that be the case? Would it matter? Yes, if it says something about law and the political

system and suggests how they might be taught, improved and better understood.

The same sorts of questions can be asked about journalists and novelists. Would the answers matter? Yes, because they might say something about journalism and fiction and could suggest how they might be taught, improved and better understood. This could best be achieved by an interdisciplinary approach involving scholars in literature and journalism and possibly even cultural studies. Unfortunately these disciplines are not renowned for cooperating with each other. The battlegrounds have been numerous, ranging from debate over journalism's alleged position at the lower end of the cultural transmission and textual credibility scales to a journalistic view that literary theorists are a bit like the stock market – it's inspired by loads of speculation and rarely reflects what's happening at the corner store, which privileges that befuddled theory called "real life".

Even so, it is worth calling for a shared renaissance in literary and journalistic studies to identify and study common threads in various forms of writing. On both a textual and contextual basis, it may be useful for the academy to undertake a multi-disciplinary approach to examine Australia's journalism and fiction synergies. Such a study might begin by identifying a cohort of journalist-novelists and novelists without journalistic experience whose writing and its influences would be examined. A theoretical framework and methodology for such an analysis might incorporate such factors as:

- The historical backdrop in forms of writing for journalism and fiction.
- The functions, values and purposes of newspapers and novels and their levels of authority and influence.
- Narrative and story-telling strategies and information-gathering techniques in fiction and journalism.
- The relationships between journalists and readers and novelists and readers.
- Voice, tone, point of view, dialogue, settings, themes, truth-telling, creativity, symbolism, characterisation, description

and notions of objectivity and subjectivity in the two forms of writing.

- An examination of the training, education and practice of journalists and how they might privilege forms of composition.
- A survey of novelists, journalists and publishers to ascertain how various forms of writing and types of occupational and life experiences might inform fiction and journalism.

Such an endeavour would need to identify differences between feature writing and news reporting and consider their implications. As has been widely observed, feature writing often employs literary techniques and is more closely associated with the journalist-to-novelist transition than any other journalistic form. It implies an orientation toward fiction, as was the case with novelists ranging from Tom Wolfe to Olga Masters. According to Norman Sims (1984: 3), literary journalists recognise “the facts” only begin to explain what is happening: “The everyday stories that bring us inside the lives of our neighbours used to be found in the realm of the fiction writer, while nonfiction reporters brought us the news from far-off centers of power that hardly touched our lives. Literary journalists unite the two forms.” Harry Allen applies literary analysis to journalism in teaching feature writing. In so doing, he studies the journalism of Dickens, Mailer, Twain, Crane, and Hemingway.

I learned that in good journalism the analytical reader could often discover techniques and devices normally associated with works of literature. I learned to look beneath the surface and find out why a piece of writing left me angry, or puzzled, or depressed, or happy. I discovered that these writers, these crafty journalists, were using simile and metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and repetition, parody, allegory and even symbolism. (1983: 51)

Bennett (1989: 5) has commented on the relative critical neglect of some Australian novelist-journalists. He says some university literary scholars scorn “literary journalism” and notes “slighting references” to the journalistic experience of novelists. An interdisciplinary approach, as suggested, might encourage more literary scholars to accept that journalism and literature have important roles in the cultural landscape. By applying specialist knowledge for a common purpose, they might

discover more resonance than dissonance in the two forms of public expression.

Conclusion

Exegesis of Johnston's life and work indicates journalism provided a powerful and formative channel for public narratives. This began with reportage, unfolded further in feature writing and broadened into fiction, which gave him a freer voice for discourse on war, manhood and suburbia. The profession taught him how to write commercially and it rewarded him commercially. In his fiction, Johnston fashioned thematic tools as reader-driven "news angles". He created Jack Meredith to animate those themes. Jack Meredith/Johnston served as a cultural signpost for reader identification, embodying much that David Meredith/George Johnston was not. In comparison with Jack, David Meredith is both tall poppy and black sheep, the lost son viewing himself and his nation through time, distance and journalism. He served as a model through which the author and perhaps his readers would define, and possibly discover more about, themselves, their heritage and their nation: it's our country, Jack.

Writing, of course, is only one element of communication: one must first have something to say. In this respect, it may be assumed training in gathering information under the pressures of "getting it right and getting it fast" assisted George Johnston's development. However, the cumulative positive effects of putting so many journalistic words on so much paper over so many years should not be discounted. According to Alan Wearne:

It cannot escape the reader that the main business of a writer is actual writing. No doubt it helped Johnston to arrive at writing fiction via journalism. For all his wartime adventures and the accompanying exploration of the world from Tibet to New York, deadlines had to be met. A hack-journo he may have felt he was, but such a background gave him the kind of training that helped him survive Hydras's darkest day and build on all this when he returned to Australia ... his earlier days in journalism seemed to have injected him with the ability to keep writing. (1991: 6-7)

Journalism privileges development of an authorial voice, a voice through which George Johnston effectively claimed the social-messenger status of a national town crier. It gave him the institutional clout and textual confidence to address nation-building myths that seemed to pre-figure his own life. Journalism fixed a documentary stamp on his social realist fiction. It provided a contextual platform through which he converted his family into a cultural microcosm of Australia. In becoming a reporter-novelist telling the nation what he saw, heard and felt in his boyhood lounge-room, he connected with lounge-rooms where his novel was to be read.

Journalism was Johnston's toolkit from which he built a magical body of literature that has had remarkable durability. The profession both enabled and nobbled his literary development and his life. But it also gave him the training, material and confidence he needed to experiment with other writing forms. The income it offered also created a dependence on journalism that may well have hindered his creative development. For example, it rewarded writing speed that flowed into and weakened his fiction, which could have been enriched by a more deliberative approach. As Johnston once conceded, he "was very facile and churned out books at the drop of a semi-colon" (Wheatley 2001: 25). This shows in much of his prose. The language often consists of what might be heard over a back fence. But there is another side to this. Wearne (1991: 2) points out that, the familiar can generate a certain awe. This awe is amplified when it comes in the kind of fiction Johnston wrote: "Some fiction may bring out the response, 'isn't this wonderful, I could *never* have written this'. But *My Brother Jack* belongs to an even more special category: 'Isn't this wonderful, I could have written this'". As this remark demonstrates, Johnston was, like any good journalist, attuned to his audience in language as much as in theme.

Johnston's journalism suffused his fiction. It acted as a laboratory through which he developed work habits and research and writing skills applicable and adaptable to other prose formulas. The profession also gave Johnston a crow's nest from which to view Australia's self-invention and identity formation. In showing Australians an earlier version of themselves, Johnston's trilogy represents an unsurpassed literary unit of cultural transmission for that period. It perhaps can be

seen in conjunction with “Avalon”, the name of his boyhood home in “a flat and dreary suburb”, which is mentioned in the first page of *My Brother Jack*. It was the mythical place where King Arthur was taken to recover from his wounds and also a real place where his mother, a nurse, assisted wounded soldiers. Johnston seems to have used his trilogy as his own “Avalon” to bring self-understanding to his “wounds”. That process ties the growth of David Meredith to Australia’s growth. It also helps to explain the trilogy’s success and endurance.

Brotherson (1997: 87) notes that Meredith, as a boy, climbs onto the roof of Avalon to survey his suburb. This puts him above the house where maimed soldiers are recuperating. As an adult, he canvasses the continent from an aeroplane. Such an overview of landscapes is evocative of Australia’s literature as ultimately a child of the land. It also evokes what journalism provided Johnston: a good position from which to survey his surroundings and identify and recount patterns observed in the scuffles below.

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